

## The Strategy of Containment in Fighting Terrorism

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### Introduction

The current U.S. National Security Strategy for fighting the war against terrorism is under attack as a policy that is unsustainable, unilateral and a marked departure from past U.S. principles. It calls for an open-ended war against terrorism that continues to be costly to the United States in both blood and treasure. Although the doctrine calls for the promotion of democracy and human rights around the world, it is perceived as being largely words with no action, and when action is called for, it is through force. To win the fight against terrorism an alternative strategy is needed. A strategy that is sustainable and can be supported at home and abroad—the strategy of containment. It is a strategy that succeeded in winning the Cold War and is capable of reclaiming America's once high international stature. It is a sensible policy that relies on diplomacy, economic incentives, respect for international institutions and stresses the importance of allies for its success. However, not all aspects of the strategy of containment implemented during the Cold War will transfer to today's war on terrorism.

This paper presents the tenets of containment strategy. It evaluates its past application against the Soviet Union and the future challenges it faces in its application to terrorist organizations. Although the challenges are many, this paper argues that containment is a viable alternative to current U.S. policy and will help regain the country's tradition of high moral standing.

### Current U.S. Strategy

The current U.S. strategy for fighting terrorism is documented in the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, the National Security Strategy, and speeches by President G.W. Bush. The strategy has been uniquely different in principle than any previous administration's strategy and is often referred to as the "Bush Doctrine." The U.S. strategy to combat terrorism was first published in February 2003 under the title "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism." The strategy's top priority was explained as combating terrorism and securing the homeland from future attacks. It indicated that the fight against terrorism would use all available means: diplomatic, economic, law enforcement, financial, information, intelligence, and military. The strategy stated that the "United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community in this fight against a common foe. If necessary, however, we will not hesitate to act alone, to exercise our right to self defense, including acting preemptively against terrorists to prevent them from doing harm to our people and our country."<sup>[1]</sup> The strategy's goal for defeating terrorism is listed as a 4D strategy: defeat, deny, diminish and defend. Defeating terrorism will require the denial of terrorist sanctuaries, the destruction of terrorist leadership and communications as well as the targeting of state sponsors and other organizations that help terrorists thrive. Denying terrorists sanctuary and support is the second goal. The United States will support weak states in order to enable them to

fight terrorism as well as persuade reluctant states and act strongly against unwilling states. Also, the United States will focus on diminishing the underlying conditions that lead to terrorism, that is, win the war of ideas and reverse the spread of extremist ideologies. In the last phase the United States will defend its citizens both at home and abroad as well as the homeland through the implementation of the National Strategy for Homeland Security. This strategy focuses on preventing terrorist attacks within the United States while the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism focuses on fighting terrorism before it reaches the homeland.

The latest National Strategy for Combating Terrorism was published in September 2006.<sup>[2]</sup> In this version, U.S. accomplishments in the fight against terrorism were presented. These included the killing or capturing of key Al-Qaeda leaders, the elimination of safe havens in Afghanistan, and the undermining of various financial supporters of Al-Qaeda. The strategy lists its continuing goal of defeating violent extremism as well as the creation of a global environment inhospitable to violent extremists. It includes attacking terrorists wherever they are, killing them and their leaders, and undermining their communications and propaganda messages. It also includes denying rogue states the ability to develop or otherwise acquire WMD that could end up in terrorist hands. Overall, the current policy for fighting the war on terrorism is to use every instrument of national power to kill or capture terrorists, deny them safe haven and cut off their sources of support.

The March 2006 version of the National Security Strategy of the United States places its emphasis on domestic actions for protecting the homeland. It is based on two pillars: first, "promoting freedom, justice, and human dignity—working to end tyranny, to promote effective democracies, and to extend prosperity through free and fair trade." The second is "confronting the challenges of our time by leading a growing community of democracies," which means the United States will actively support democratic governments and movements.<sup>[3]</sup> The belief behind this is that democracy produces governments that are unlikely to support extremists and terrorists. It is the belief that "promoting democracy is the most effective long-term measure for strengthening international stability; reducing regional conflicts; countering terrorism and terror-supporting extremism; and extending peace and prosperity."<sup>[4]</sup> Most important is the notion that democratic governments do not attack other democratic countries. This last belief by the Bush administration has been attributed to helping spur on the 2003 decision to invade Iraq where it was hoped there would be a domino effect spreading democracy throughout the Middle East.

Within the Bush Doctrine, there is an overwhelming desire to seek the advancement of human dignity by helping create a world of democratic countries. The doctrine contends that championing freedom advances both U.S. interests as well as helps win the battle of ideas. The National Security Strategy of the United States advocates the promotion of democracy such that, "as we consider which approaches to take, we will be guided by what will most effectively advance freedom's cause while we balance other interests that are also vital to the security and well being of the American people."<sup>[5]</sup> Unfortunately, this statement can be interpreted either in support of regime change and forced democracy building as in Afghanistan or Iraq, or it can justify the continuing support of dictatorships such as in Egypt and Saudi Arabia for the sake of perceived stability. A criticism of this policy is that it has "paid little or no attention to the suffering and aspirations of the peoples living under such regimes, and upheld its stand on human rights very selectively and only in relation to its adversaries, not in respect of those it wished to subordinate."<sup>[6]</sup> And, as stated by Dunn, "America acquiesced in, if not encouraged, the clamp-down on radical opposition groups in autocratic states in pursuit of the War on Terrorism."<sup>[7]</sup>

Shapiro argues that the Bush Doctrine has many critical flaws. This includes giving the United States the right to act militarily anywhere in the world, including the policy of preemptive war as well as the right to unilateral action, essentially meaning the United States can and will flout international laws and act alone if it sees fit. Shapiro writes: "President Truman had described preemptive wars as 'weapons of dictators, not of free democratic countries like the United States.'"<sup>[8]</sup> A harsher criticism came from Mamdani who indicated that preemptive war is the logic for genocide, "it is not accidental that most genocides have been carried out in times of war. The

population is told: if you do not kill, you will be killed. You kill because you fear they may do to you what you are about to do to them.”<sup>[9]</sup> Additionally, the doctrine envisions a condition of permanent war and calls for regime change by replacing dictatorships with democracies by any means necessary, including violent invasion. Finally, the Bush doctrine can be summed up by a declaration made by President Bush immediately after 9/11: “you are either with us or with the terrorists.”<sup>[10]</sup> This statement asserts that the war against terrorism is decidedly one dictated by the United States and those nations that choose to assist will do so on the United States’ terms. This demonstrated to all a great arrogance of power. Furthermore, according to Cumings, the United States will “impose its will where it wants, when it wants, regardless of allied or world opinion.”<sup>[11]</sup> In all, the Bush Doctrine is an unsustainable policy of unilateralism that has been costly to the United States in blood, money and prestige. Shapiro indicates that the doctrine “has squandered much of America’s moral capital, strained traditional alliances in unprecedented ways with its haphazard unilateralism and weakened vital international institutions.”<sup>[12]</sup> Moreover, the Bush doctrine has eroded trust from the international community by shattering the belief “that the U.S. will not act recklessly as to put at risk the safety and security of the entire developed world.”<sup>[13]</sup>

## Nature of Fundamentalist Terrorism

Throughout its history, America has suffered through and survived many terrorist attacks. As indicated in the February 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, “The first major terrorist attack on New York City’s financial district, for instance, did not occur on September 11, or even with the 1993 truck bombing of the World Trade Center. It occurred September 16, 1920 when anarchists exploded a horse cart filled with dynamite near the intersection of Wall and Broad Streets, taking 40 lives and wounding about 300 others.”<sup>[14]</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s terrorist organizations were generally secular and nationalist. Some of these organizations were disbanded through the use of law enforcement efforts and others with the application of pressure on the countries that supported them, which resulted in the loss of their physical bases of operation. The 1990s and on have seen an increase in religious-based terrorist movements, particularly that of Islamic extremists with Al-Qaeda being the vanguard. Prior to 9/11, Al-Qaeda had a physical base in Afghanistan. After 9/11 and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban was removed from power and Al-Qaeda’s physical bases and training camps were no longer viable, except for a few locations near the Pakistani border region of Waziristan. Today’s current threat from fundamentalist terrorism is one consisting of a transnational movement of extremist organizations believed to be operating in more than sixty countries. Al-Qaeda is still the movement’s vanguard, though it does not exert control over many of these other movements. Thus the enemy is flexible, dispersed and decentralized. However, the movement is still united through a common ideology that exploits Western interventions in the Muslim world as an attack on Islam and uses terrorism as a means to achieving its goals. As indicated in the September 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, “sophisticated use of the internet and media has enabled our terrorist enemies to communicate, recruit, train, rally support, proselytize, and spread their propaganda without risking personal contact.”<sup>[15]</sup>

## The Origin of Containment

In order to understand the policy of containment the United States undertook against the Soviet Union, it is best to review the works of George Kennan, best known as the “Father of Containment.” His most notable publication on the subject is what is known as “The Long Telegram,” which was sent on February 22, 1946 to the State Department while he was assigned to Moscow. Kennan wrote that according to Stalin, the socialist center and the capitalist center would continue to battle each other for command of the world economy and the outcome of the battle would determine the fate of either nation. He stated: “we have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with [the] U.S. there can be no permanent modus vivendi, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our

traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure.”[16]

His second publication, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” first indicated as being authored by X but later confirmed as being by Kennan, stated “Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce... corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy,” and “the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.”[17] He argued that capitalist systems can live in peace with Russia and that the United States’ problem with them can be resolved without military conflict. Kennan also believed that the Russians were highly sensitive to the threat of a powerful force. He believed the United States should deal with Russia calmly, undermining their propaganda, educating the public of the realities of the situation as well as demonstrating the capabilities of our own system. He also indicated that the Soviet power “bears within it the seeds of its own decay.”[18] Furthermore, “to avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best tradition and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.”[19]

This U.S. policy of Soviet containment contained political, economic and military components in confronting the Soviet threat all over the world. Years later, Kennan would argue that his containment policy was misunderstood as he only implied political and economic containment such that both covert actions as well as economic aid, similar to that undertaken in Europe by the Marshall Plan, would help isolate the Soviet Union and help decrease its influence. In an interview with David Gergen in 1996, Kennan stated “I found it easy to convince them (the U.S. Government) that this was a very dangerous group of men (the Soviets). But I couldn’t persuade them that their aspirations were political.”[20] He argued that the alteration from his intended, mainly political and economic containment, to that of military containment helped lead to the root causes of the Korean War and Vietnam War. He believed that the false understanding of his containment policy ended up militarizing U.S. foreign policy. In his containment strategy, Kennan also separated what he termed vital and peripheral interests. In the case of vital interests, war is deemed acceptable. The Cuban missile crisis was a vital interest, thus President Kennedy’s stand was correct, as was the U.S. action undertaken in 2001 in Afghanistan to remove the Taliban. The Vietnam War and the Iraq War are viewed as peripheral interests where diplomacy, economic incentives, sanctions and multilateral action by international institutions should have been the way to proceed. However, President Bush stated, “After September 11, the doctrine of containment just doesn’t hold any water, as far as I’m concerned.”[21]

In summary, as indicated by Dunn, “In moving beyond containment and deterrence the administration was adopting a radically different approach to foreign policy that was much more assertive than previous policy and much more reliant on American power and a willingness to use it.”[22]

## Application of Containment

The policy of containment has been increasingly brought to the forefront because of its success in the past and the fact that it offers hope for a better alternative to current policy. Gaddis argues that containment is worth considering, though not all aspects of Cold War containment are relevant to a post-9/11 world and instead argues for selective transferability. This is because the circumstances that gave rise to Cold War containment, sustained it and eventually made it successful are different from today’s environment. One of the arguments against containment is that it is a state-based strategy. The question then becomes, how can you deter a stateless entity? However, as stated by Gaddis, Al-Qaeda was not “an entirely stateless enemy.”[23] The United States knew Al-Qaeda predominantly resided in Afghanistan and still resides on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan today.

Kennan believed that exploiting contradictions between the Soviet Union and world communism was an important tenet of the containment strategy, as it would help lead to the Soviets defeating themselves. This same reasoning could also be applied post-9/11. States seek to survive with a functioning economic program and this is something fundamentalist terrorists do not currently aspire to. With sufficient economic incentives states that wish to thrive can often be pressured to reduce or eliminate their support of terrorists. Furthermore, the moderate majority of the Islamic world should be engaged to help counter the incorrect and radical ideology to which the fundamentalist terrorists adhere. This should be done first and foremost by changing the perception that the war on terror is a war against Islam as is currently perceived by many in the Muslim world.

Containment also stresses the importance of allies. The Cold War brought forth NATO and the Warsaw Pact along with the drive to attain more allies than the other side. After the end of the Cold War, the United States has been increasingly quick to utilize military force with the success of the Gulf War and incursions into Bosnia and Kosovo. As a result, there is the fear that “in the effort to resist an authoritarian adversary, the United States itself might become authoritarian whether through the imposition of a command economy or through the abridgment of democratic procedures.”<sup>[24]</sup>

## Challenges to Containment

The question has been raised: can containment be applied to the terrorism threat? What are the similarities and differences between the Soviet threat and the terrorist threat and is containment relevant to the present circumstances? Answering these questions will provide us with an understanding of the challenges containment faces as well as establishing what is applicable.

Both the Soviet Union during the Cold War and today's terrorist organizations have not proven to be amenable to persuasion or reasoning, as both the Soviet outlook and the current state of mind of terrorist organizations are antithetical to the principles of the United States. The Soviet and terrorist organizations had/have both regional and global ambitions as both wanted/want their ideology spread, and were/are anti-democracy and/or capitalism.

How can containment deal with the threat of terrorism, which is quite different than the threat posed by the Soviet Union (a nation-state), in that, is it applicable considering the transnational nature of the threat? The notion of containment asserts that “the adversary to be contained share one's own sense of risk.”<sup>[25]</sup> The reality is that terrorist organizations do not exist in a vacuum and they rely on enabling states and local populations to accomplish their goals. These enabling states provide sanctuary for training and a safe haven to conduct their business unimpeded. Without territory a terrorist group cannot pose a serious threat. As such, “Terrorist groups might not themselves always be feasible targets of containment, but enabling regimes certainly can be.”<sup>[26]</sup> For example, the containment of Libya, especially through UN sanctions, helped end its state-sponsorship of terrorism.

Another issue raised by Kennan was nourishing the competition and the drifting apart between the Soviet Union and international communism, which further weakened the Soviet Union. This same principle can work today by raising the tensions between enabling states and terrorist movements as well as between moderate Muslims and Muslim extremists. State governments are primarily concerned with domestic issues while terrorist organizations are not. Therefore, friction and competition can be applied to drive wedges between them. For example, Saudi Arabia demonstrated little concern for Al-Qaeda and the war against terrorism as long as terrorist attacks were conducted outside the country. However, once Al-Qaeda started committing terrorist acts within the nation, Saudi Arabia became much more serious about joining the war against terrorism. This proves it is important to nourish differences. Another example that has occurred recently is the Anbar Awakening in Iraq. Al-Qaeda and Sunni insurgents had previously fought



together against the United States in Iraq's Anbar province. However, the brutality of Al-Qaeda against the Iraqi people has caused the Sunnis to side with the United States against Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

An important issue is how to contain terrorists who are willing to die for their cause. Suicide bombers have been around in many different cultures and religions for ages, and they generally cannot be influenced through reasoning or incentives. Suicide bombers do not act alone, which means their leaders and organizations can be subject to containment. As indicated by Shapiro, the "focus for a national security policy is those who plan and orchestrate the missions. They play by different rules from those of the bombers they deploy."<sup>[27]</sup> As such, it is the leaders of these organizations, the ones that extol the "glories of martyrdom" to help influence and control recruits and who are generally located in a set nation-state, that could be contained. These leaders are the ones that drive their organization while at the same time are not actively seeking "martyrdom" for themselves. Essentially, "Terrorism is a political phenomenon. Consequently, until the political problems that give rise to contemporary global terrorism are resolved, the struggle against it will not be successful."<sup>[28]</sup> Since many of these terrorists reside within their place of attack, this emphasizes the notion of combating the ideology and the cause, and increasing tensions to break the terrorist mantra. Al-Qaeda still maintains a base of support on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. As defeating Al-Qaeda is vital to the United States' national interests, continuing the fight in Afghanistan through a coalition of forces is essential for success in eroding the Al-Qaeda threat.

Weak states pose another challenge to containment—they are first in need of assistance. Multilateral policies can be developed to help weak states secure their borders, help in economic development and help find solutions to their internal challenges and conflicts. Resolving these issues can help provide them with both the means and will to stand up to terrorism. Somalia is a good example of a country in such dire need of international help while at the same time needing to contain the terrorist threat that resides within its borders.

An additional concern is the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). There is a concern of rogue states producing them and terrorists acquiring them. As indicated by Allison and Kokoshin, "Preventing nuclear terrorism will require no less imagination, energy and persistence than did avoiding nuclear war between the superpowers over four decades of Cold War."<sup>[29]</sup> Terrorists generally do not have the means to produce WMD but they can acquire them by theft, illicit purchase, or through an enabling state. The effort to stop this requires deep sustained cooperation by all WMD-empowered states to restrict the sale and guarantee the security of such materials. In addition, intelligence sharing and counter-proliferation is necessary to prevent the production or acquisition of such materials. Current U.S. policy appears to have had the opposite effect on WMD production. President Bush's State of the Union address after 9/11 in which he described North Korea, Iran and Iraq as part of an Axis of Evil has been counter-productive.<sup>[30]</sup> North Korea and Iran both saw the U.S. attack and occupation of Iraq and likely assumed that they were next. As such, both nations began to increase their attempts at nuclear armament. Current U.S. policy towards North Korea has been one of containment and has been showing progress as North Korea has begun reporting on its nuclear weapons. Regarding Iran, U.S. policy has not chosen containment and instead uses threatening and aggressive rhetoric. This has not succeeded as yet in convincing Iran to give up its alleged WMD program. Under a policy of containment with respect to countries such as Iran, strong multilateral commitments could be utilized to prevent negative outcomes without the threat of unilateral war, thus ensuring greater international cooperation. Fortunately, this is currently happening by working with our allies to negotiate with and contain Iran.

Additionally, the United States should assist in the spread of democracy around the world. This is not one of Kennan's strategies of containment, but it is an important aspect to containing terrorist organizations. This is not to say that democracy completely eradicates terrorism, but it can provide hope to people and undermine many of the causes or support for terrorism. Supporting

repression, even by allies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, fosters breeding grounds for terrorism and erodes America's international credibility. However, spreading democracy does not mean forcible regime change, which likely results in the loss of cooperation from other democratic allies as has occurred in the current war in Iraq. Spreading democracy requires the supporting of "indigenous democratic forces and to withhold support from their authoritarian opponents" without fighting their battle for them.[31] Democracy cannot be imposed by an outside power and takes years to develop on its own. The sanctions applied to South Africa during the 1980s along with the support of the local population and allies are an example of successful peaceful democratic reform. On the other hand, the war in Iraq is an example of forcible regime change that has not only failed to gain cooperation from allies but also produced fodder for international anti-American sentiment as well as increased recruitment for terrorist organizations. However, if it should ever become the vital interest of the United States to effect a regime change, success "requires not only the acquiescence of the target population, but the long term support of the American public and the buy-in of America's allies and coalition partners." [32]

## Conclusion

The application of a containment strategy against fundamentalist terrorist organizations faces several challenges. To understand these challenges, both the similarities and the differences between the Soviet Union during the Cold War era and current terrorist organizations were analyzed. Terrorist organizations do not exist in a vacuum, they rely on enabling states, and so enabling states can be contained to undermine their support for terrorists. The competition between the Soviet Union and international communism is similar to that of the conflict today between radical Islamists and moderate Muslims. This can be exploited to help these terrorist organizations defeat themselves. The United States should end its support of dictatorships, thus providing hope to people who might otherwise turn to terrorism. With respect to weak states, assistance is imperative—especially the improvement of economic conditions. Another issue is the threat of WMD, which can be contained as well.

As the U.S. National Security Strategy indicated, the United States cannot win the war on terrorism by military power alone, it needs to win the war of ideas. All of the above challenges can be met but only with the help of allies. The United States will need to work hard to gain back the support and trust of those at home and abroad. Needless to say, future use of containment will require the rebuilding and shoring up of the building blocks of international cooperation. In conclusion, the United States was successful in containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and today, through international cooperation including with states of the former Soviet Union, it can be successful at containing extremist terrorist organizations, as well.

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